



## Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /  
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

12 | 2016

Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

---

# “It’s the fabric of the place” – Life Histories of Five Welsh Women Artists

Penelope Collet

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8578>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.8578

ISSN: 2108-6559

### Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

### Electronic reference

Penelope Collet, ““It’s the fabric of the place” – Life Histories of Five Welsh Women Artists”, *Miranda* [Online], 12 | 2016, Online since 02 March 2016, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8578> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8578>

---

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

# "It's the fabric of the place" – Life Histories of Five Welsh Women Artists

Penelope Collet

---

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This updated paper was originally drawn from an early manuscript of my book, *The Life Histories of Five Contemporary Welsh Women Artists: The interweaving of art into living and living into art*, published by Edwin Mellen Press in 2012. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Congrès de la SAES, Paris 20, 21, 22 May 2011- Atelier d'études galloises

Women's histories provide a vivid and perhaps drastic example of the reconstitution of history through the opening up of a new and different space of knowledge. The field is not simply expanded by the intrusion of hitherto excluded knowledge. Its borders are interfered with; its ontological status is problematised, reorganised and redefined (Peim 2005, 30-31)

## Introduction

- 1 This paper reports on the conclusions of research which has told the life histories of five Welsh women artists working over the last half of the twentieth century and for four into the new.<sup>1</sup> It addresses some of the current issues of concern to the artists and to contemporary writers on the arts in Wales. These issues include the growing awareness of post-colonialism, Welsh identity, pastoralism and the art/craft divide. Relevant literature is introduced and the research methodology is briefly addressed to outline the research journey.
- 2 During the time of this project, I observed a growing awareness of Welsh women's contributions to the visual arts, particularly evident in writing emerging about early

career artists. However, there is still a long way to go to establish a tradition for women artists in Wales. While some would argue that for all Welsh artists, women and men, this is a problem, obstacles to women's careers in art continue to be a concern for the artists in this study. These tensions arise: within the home, in their art training, in attempting to exhibit and gain critical recognition, in their identification as Welsh, in their choice to work in Wales rather than in the leading art centres such as London, and in their choice of art media, genre and content.

## Brief literature

- 3 Early feminist projects set out to recover "lost" artists who were women (Harris and Nochlin 1976; Greer 1979; and Petersen and Wilson 1976). In the 20th century and beyond, the dominant discourses of mainstream art practice served, and continue to serve, to delegitimise the art practice of women. These include the wider discourse of European modernism, the modernist construct of the male genius, and the discourses pertaining to the hierarchical status of art media, including the art/craft dualism. Marginalization of women because of the nature of their art practice (content, medium and genre) and delegitimation of expression of their sexuality and subjectivity, are still concerns for contemporary women artists (Collet 2004).
- 4 In 2000, Welsh scholar, Peter Lord, published the widely acclaimed book, *Imaging the Nation*, in which he rejected the widely accepted view that Welsh culture has a predominantly musical, oral and text-based heritage. He provided bountiful evidence of painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, cinema, and some printmaking and illustration to argue for the richness of the visual heritage that belongs to Wales. Thus there was a substantial sense of Welsh national identity and cultural tradition upon which Welsh visual artists could build. Lord included only one woman, a small image and brief paragraph about Claudia Williams, in his survey. Thus one would conclude that the visual heritage he was revealing was almost entirely a male one. For Welsh women, then, is there a tangible visual tradition on which they might draw? The sociologist of art, Janet Woolf (1989, 2), raises the question: "What is the possibility for women to write (or paint) from their own experience, no longer mediated by the culture and point of view of men?"
- 5 There are a number of examples of Welsh women's visual traditions. Moira Vincentelli (1994, 40) writes that collections of china arranged on the Welsh dresser should be recognised as "central to any concept of Welsh visual culture and tradition". How women organise the domestic space and collect and display objects establishes social meaning, a type of cultural production. In this context, the collection of china and the importance of its display on the Welsh dresser reflect a space of domestic display in which "women have exerted some control and creativity" (Vincentelli 2000, 128).
- 6 To get a sense of the nature of Welsh culture it is helpful to look at the structure of Welsh society and the gender divides within it. Over the last century and a half, the limited employment opportunities in Wales have given rise to well-defined gender roles, with labour and work being predominantly masculine (Aaron, Vincentelli et al 1994; Beddoe 2000, 2003; White & Williams 1998). A few women were able to continue their education and graduate as teachers and nurses. Most women were confined to domestic spaces as homemakers, or domestics in the houses of the wealthy, until World War II. Sewing, spinning, knitting and weaving often crossed the boundary from

domestic to paid work, and a study of quilts and the circumstances of their production provides insights into women's creative output and into their lives and roles as homemakers. Jen Jones (1997) writes of the travelling quilters, carrying with them their tools and personal requirements, as they walked from one hill farm to the next, sometimes accompanied by a young girl, an apprentice. Then through war-work many more women gained financial independence for the first time and refused to go back to the former ill-paid roles of domestic worker and seamstress.

- 7 While constrained by gender roles and social mores, women did engage in creative activities and within many families the handing down of beautiful hand crafted objects such as quilts and valued heirlooms such as the dresser and china provided a visual tradition for women. As female and domestic, such traditions were ignored by art historians until the late twentieth century. This failure to write in the history of Welsh women's art has impoverished the world's knowledge of Welsh visual culture and left generations of artists without an authorised visual tradition with which to connect. Despite this, women have persevered and made successful careers from the second half of the twentieth century.

## Methodology

- 8 The methodology adopted for this research was feminist and poststructuralist, as my interest has been in women's lives and in asking questions about women. It has been well established in the feminist research literature that these are research directions that have been denied or overlooked in the traditional social sciences. In-depth interviews were the means selected to best draw out the life stories of four of the artists. As Laura Ashley, the fifth, was no longer living I decided to draw upon sources already in the public domain: interviews with Ashley and family members and secondary sources such as articles, media reports and biographies.
- 9 A feminist researcher empowers women by valuing their perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to grant the speaking woman interpretive respect without reneging on the responsibility to interpret her experience. This interpretation, made through the explicit political vision of the researcher with regard to the structural conditions leading to social behaviours, may not be seen as valid by the narrator. This quandary addressed by Borland (1991, 64) is a very real one for researchers. Borland suggests a partial solution in establishing an exchange with the narrator involving "interpretive conflict and discussion" from which might emerge individual interpretive space and an understanding of each other's perspectives (Borland 1991, 74).
- 10 The life history approach is valuable, according to Grimshaw (1982, 6), "to relate the past as seen through the eyes of the individual". The accounts are characterised as "particular and personal". Grimshaw (1982, 6) places emphasis on the individual's idiosyncratic view of her own experiences and is critical of history that sets out "to construct analytical frameworks that neatly categorise and subdue individual experience". This approach allowed in my study, a focus on the subjective lives of individuals, a recognition of their diversity and the opportunity to collaborate with them to provide new insights about their lives (Baronne 1995, 73).
- 11 Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Approaches to artists were made through shared contacts and through letters. Artists were fully informed under conditions of my university ethics body and voluntarily gave permission to be involved. It was their

encouragement and commitment to the aims of the research that has sustained me over the study.

## Results and conclusions

- 12 The life stories of the women artists were recorded and interpreted by the researcher. Where possible the women's own words were used to tell their stories, thus allowing the women's voices to be heard. From these stories a number of themes arose and these are discussed here. In the first section concerns raised by contemporary Welsh writers on the visual arts are identified. These concerns include the growing awareness of post-colonialism, Welsh identity, pastoralism and the art/craft divide.
- 13 In the second section, obstacles to women's careers and wider concerns arising from the life histories are discussed under themes of: within the home, in their art training, in attempting to exhibit and gain critical recognition, in their identification as Welsh, in their choice to work in Wales rather than in the leading art centres such as London, and in their choice of art media, genre and content.

### Section one

- 14 Evident in the writing of Hugh Adams is an awareness of the political position of post-colonialism.

Wales it has been said was England's first colony and although it has been many years since it was physically garrisoned, it must be observed that there is no greater garrison and no more effective coloniser than the mind itself (2003,7).
- 15 Now that "cultural power" has been relocated he believes that Wales today determines "what is of importance culturally and educationally". The growing "distinctiveness and self-confidence" of Welsh artists is reflected in their increasing "cultural autonomy" (2003, 15).
- 16 However, Iwan Bala (2005, 1) is less confident about the Welsh ability to overcome "ongoing cultural colonialism" as manifested in the "colonised mentality" (2005, 2). He calls upon the Welsh National Assembly to provide more leadership, to institute a National Gallery of Welsh Art, and to support a national art magazine for critical writing and scholarship about Welsh art. Without these national institutions Welsh art has no home on which to focus international attention.
- 17 Bala (2005, 4) writes that artists have adopted a variety of strategies to "cross cultural and political borders": working outside of Wales to gain recognition, working at the centre London rather than the periphery in Wales, through examining "issues of their particular identity, its particular and gender borders, and the nature of the global market" (2005, 7). Rather than be seduced by art that is a global homogenization, artists produce work that is international in scope but that is "authentic to its own cultural experience" (2005, 8). Post-colonialism and postmodernism has allowed, says Bala, artists around the world the freedom to employ hybrid practices:

[...] to absorb from their indigenous culture (often many-layered and depending upon multiple understandings of the 'indigenous'), from colonialist culture, and from global culture generally (2005, 8).
- 18 Welsh identity is an issue also of concern to these writers. The broad definition of "Welshness" as given by Adams is a useful one for this study. He writes that a Welsh

artist is "any artist who has spent sufficient time in the country to get *cultured* into it" (Adams 2003, 25).

- 19 He argues that that "Welshness" may provide distinctiveness from international art but that can be "an advantage or a prison" (2003, 25). This double bind is recognised by many artists in Wales. The widely-held opinion that "any overt expression of 'Welshness' has been seen as backward—only interesting in a folkloric sense" is one that concerns artists identifying as Welsh. As a result artists tend to look at exacting international standards and, as Adam's explains:

... [t]his is no argument in favour of a monolithic, global art, merely that quality in difference should be recognised, without recourse to the false or arbitrary elevation of the folksy or the 'ethnic' simply for 'distinctiveness' sake (2003, 26).

- 20 Bala supports this position and uses the term 'custodial aesthetics' to explain that artists engage not only with international trends but also with an iconography drawn from Welsh traditions. This new shift and optimism in art, he says, reflects a change towards a truly postcolonial Welsh identity (2005, 21).
- 21 Other writers see language and place as being central to Welsh identity. Nettle and Romaine (2006, 108) explain that if a language is lost then the system of knowledge that that language encodes is also gone. Language is central to social capital and when this is lost then so is the cement of communities that maintains cultural activities and social norms.
- 22 For some the notion of place and belonging is central to the concept of Welsh identity. Tamara Krikorian (1999) believes that it is unusual today for indigenous communities to remain intact, speaking their mother tongue and living on traditional lands. Drawing on a shared cultural heritage associated with place allows others to share in the collective memory as revealed by an artist. Ex-patriot artists maintain links with their birthplace, young artists studying away return to practise as do older artists having achieved success outside. As well, many artists settle in rural areas to improve their quality of life (Adams 2003).
- 23 The notion of pastoralism raised here by Adams has a history in Britain from Victorian times in influencing artists and crafts people. Glenn Adamson (2007) traces the pastoralist ideal to its source in the Greek classics. The enjoyment of tranquillity, a quality associated with withdrawal from city life to the country, was a gift bestowed on the shepherd (*pastor* L.), the allegorical figure in classical poetry, whose occupation put him close to nature and gave him time for philosophising on life. Since the nineteenth century, two examples of pastoralism come to mind where rural artistic communities were established in a period of "romantic anti-modernism and revolutionary socialism" (Adamson 2007, 108). First, Kelsmscott Manor was the home and retreat of designer William Morris and second, Dartington Hall was set up as an educational, social and rural experiment by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst in 1928. Both these examples nurtured artistic communities but were also important as social and political experiments. In Wales, a third community, Gregynog Hall, was converted into a centre of excellence for the arts and crafts by Gwendoline and Margaret Davies in the 1920s (University of Wales 2015, n.p.). They emphasised the importance of handcrafted objects and followed, like Morris, a path that was essentially anti-industrial.
- 24 The rise of the counter culture of the 1960s was a more recent period adopting the "quintessentially pastoral ethos of 'dropping out'" (Adamson 2007, 106). With this came "the peak of crafts' popularity as a cultural phenomenon". He writes that the pastoral

can be seen as "a powerful way of envisioning social and artistic change" (2007, 105). However, the linking of pastoralism to the revival of craft traditions creates immediate concerns through association for the artist who chooses to work in the quiet of the countryside.

- 25 The art/craft divide continues to be debated despite the intervening years since the introduction of broader egalitarian views of postmodernism in the 1970s. Within the inclusivity of a postmodern standpoint, one artwork can be interpreted as each: art, craft and design. John Dewey (1937) conflates these terms within the action of one individual: the teaching of craft knowledge "cannot be put into words because it is the work of the artist-designer himself (sic) and no one can tell him just how to do it. If they could tell him, his work would be mechanical not creative and original" (cited in Adamson 2007, 86). Dewey and Walter Gropius both "resisted the hierarchical division of fine and useful arts, and saw artistic potential in all modes of technological production" (2007, 83). William Morris had endeavoured to revive vanishing craft traditions threatened by the Industrial Revolution. With his artist friends he set up a design firm that showed "how the rift between the 'fine arts' and the 'minor arts' could be healed" (Encyclopedia of Irish and World Art 2010, n.p.). Despite these well-established arguments, theorists and critics still stand by their arbitrary divisions. Glenn Adamson (2007), from his modernist position, refuses to tackle the differences. However, and most importantly, a postmodern view allows the challenging of these divisions and the inequities to which they give rise.

## Section two: Life history themes

- 26 This section of the paper addresses the themes as they arose from the reporting and interpretation of the research data. The discussion links the interpretations with the issues already raised in the previous section.

### Within the home

- 27 The differences in their early family experiences were clearly evident in the women's stories of their childhoods. Mary Lloyd Jones, Laura Ashley and Kathy Williams were born in very different parts of Wales: in Welsh-speaking Devil's Bridge, West Wales, in the coal mining region of the south, and in the multicultural, mainly English-speaking city of Cardiff, respectively. Claudia Williams was born in Essex and Shani Rhys James in a semi-rural suburb of Melbourne, Australia. Educational and financial independence appeared to be valued by the families for their daughters. World War II impacted upon their lives in terms of war service for Ashley in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), bombing raids near Claudia Williams' home, and the rationing and the general austerity of the 1950s. For Rhys James in Australia, there was security and the rich aesthetic experiences of living in a community of visual and dramatic artists. She arrived in London in the 60s where her mother, an actor, sought roles in the avant-garde theatre and also trekked with her young daughter around Europe.
- 28 Mary Lloyd Jones<sup>2</sup> wanted to leave the isolation and hardship, as she saw it, of a rural life on a small holding. Claudia Williams<sup>3</sup> became a boarder at the school she loved in Essex when her parents moved to north Wales. Kathy Williams<sup>4</sup> was directed into the traditional pathway of a secretarial course by her mother. Laura Ashley<sup>5</sup> left secondary school upon her move from London to the safer Dowlais during the war and also



undertook secretarial studies before entering the WRNS. For Mary Lloyd Jones, Claudia Williams and Shani Rhys James<sup>6</sup> art school was an inevitable outcome of their school experiences and the encouragement and support of their families. Rhys James became a student at St-Martins-in-the-Fields in London, Claudia Williams won a scholarship to Chelsea School of Art through the encouragement and inspiration of her art teacher and Lloyd Jones had a scholarship for Cardiff School of Art enabling her to live away from home during term time.

- 29 Both Ashley and Kathy Williams came to art at a later time in their lives: Ashley when she left secretarial work to have a family and Williams when introduced to spinning by a friend. Ashley was inspired by the handwork made in her grandmother's home and at the Women's Institute where she had worked so she set out to teach herself fabric printing through books borrowed from the library. Williams took over her friend's spinning wheel when she lost interest, and she became a member of the local Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers before completing the Bradford Diploma in Handloom Weaving. Williams had had almost no art background although she did learn to knit at an early age. There was no art in the home and almost no art at school. Ashley, however, had been richly influenced by traditional women's handcrafts during childhood visits to Dowlais. Also the home with its polished brasses and black range in the kitchen, the farm grown produce, and the cheerfulness and industry of female relatives had a powerful effect upon her.
- 30 The other three women had grown up in environments rich and diverse in the arts. Rhys James as a child in Australia was part of a vibrant artistic community where innovative architecture, painting and ceramics provided a context in which avant-garde theatre was explored through plays, costume and set design. Later in London she continued to be surrounded by expatriate Australian artists and stayed with Charles and Barbara Blackman when her mother was on tour. Claudia Williams attended the Eisteddfods in Wales with her mother to look at the artwork and was introduced to influential people in the arts such as John Petts and Jonah Jones of the Caseg Press who encouraged her. Her parents supported her creativity with dance and music lessons. Mary Lloyd Jones' childhood was in a home steeped in Welsh tradition where storytelling at lively social evenings called *aelwyd*, the hearth, aimed at preserving the language and the culture. Her freedom to explore gave her an intimate relationship with the landscape. Drawing helped her overcome her isolation but she also had music lessons and books. These home environments influenced the artists each in their own individual ways.

### **Making a career in art: Exhibiting and critical recognition**

- 31 Previous research carried out (Collet 1998, 2004) has identified that exhibiting is not an inevitable outcome for women after completing art school. The difficulty of breaking into the gallery scene, of having works accepted in competitions and exhibitions, and of receiving valid critical review are obstacles that sometimes lead to high levels of attrition among early career women artists. For the two women working in textiles, there was a need to develop marketing skills and collaborations to make their work known.
- 32 Kathy Williams soon found craft fairs of limited value in the sale of quality handcraft and worked with other craftspeople to establish the Makers Guild in Wales and Craft on the Bay, in Cardiff. This provided a sufficiently powerful association to promote quality



craft, to hold international exhibitions and to provide a suitable gallery for the display and sale of members' work.

- 33 Laura Ashley's business partnership with her husband, Bernard, allowed her to focus on the designing of fabrics and fashion according to her personal philosophy and interpretation of trends, while he applied his engineering and entrepreneurial skills to developing processes and machinery, and the promotion and management of the company. Following the growth of the counter culture in the 1960s there was a resurgence in crafts practice and interest in the 70s which created a ready market for Ashley's designs and for hand spun, knitted and woven woollens. As well, this provided an international springboard for craft organisations and for businesses such as "Laura Ashley".
- 34 The three painters each married artists. Family care and supporting the family were shared responsibilities but while children were small, Lloyd Jones and Williams both remained at home. Williams continued to draw and paint while Lloyd Jones found that impossible until she returned to Wales and her daughters commenced school. Rhys James taught art initially but upon the family settling in mid-Wales she stayed at home and painted full-time. She emphasised she had the best of both worlds. That it was her husband who in fact had to put his art career on hold to support the family. The two other husbands also taught art to support their families, fitting their personal art practice into their time at home.
- 35 The three women had the benefit of the support of fellow artists, their husbands, in commencing exhibiting and therefore did not experience the same level of isolation that other women have reported. Even so it was not easy. As Lloyd Jones has written, "combining motherhood with ambitions to be an artist in a culture which did not appear to value the work required a supportive partner and a stubborn streak" (Lloyd Jones 1994, 274). She recalled how they both submitted work for competitions but were rejected. There was only a very small community of artists in west Wales with little ambition and approaching galleries in London was a difficult experience for her. Anything Welsh seemed to be regarded as inferior. In North Wales, Williams and her husband, Gwilym Pritchard, found exhibiting initially was not so difficult. Both Lloyd Jones and Williams eventually exhibited and sold paintings at Howard Roberts Gallery in Cardiff.

### Welsh identity

- 36 Identifying as Welsh meant different things to the women, so Adam's broad definition is a useful one. Lloyd Jones felt that it initially arose out of language and culture but increasingly she feels that it is about place, about belonging within a particular landscape. For Claudia Williams, Wales was the adopted home of her parents, a safe retreat following the threats associated with the war. Her marriage to Welsh artist, Gwilym Pritchard, confirmed that connection. Rhys James followed her mother to Wales, with her husband and two small boys. She had a Welsh heritage through her father but increasingly she identified as Welsh through her belonging to the place that nourished her family and her art. Kathy Williams was born in Cardiff and appears never to have questioned her Welsh identity. Having lived in the Vale of Glamorgan since her marriage, she is connected through her work with horses and through her weaving for clients to the farming culture of the region. While Ashley lived in London as a child, the visits to her grandmother's house in south Wales impressed upon her spiritual and

moral values, and a view of life and aesthetics that she drew upon throughout her creative and family life.

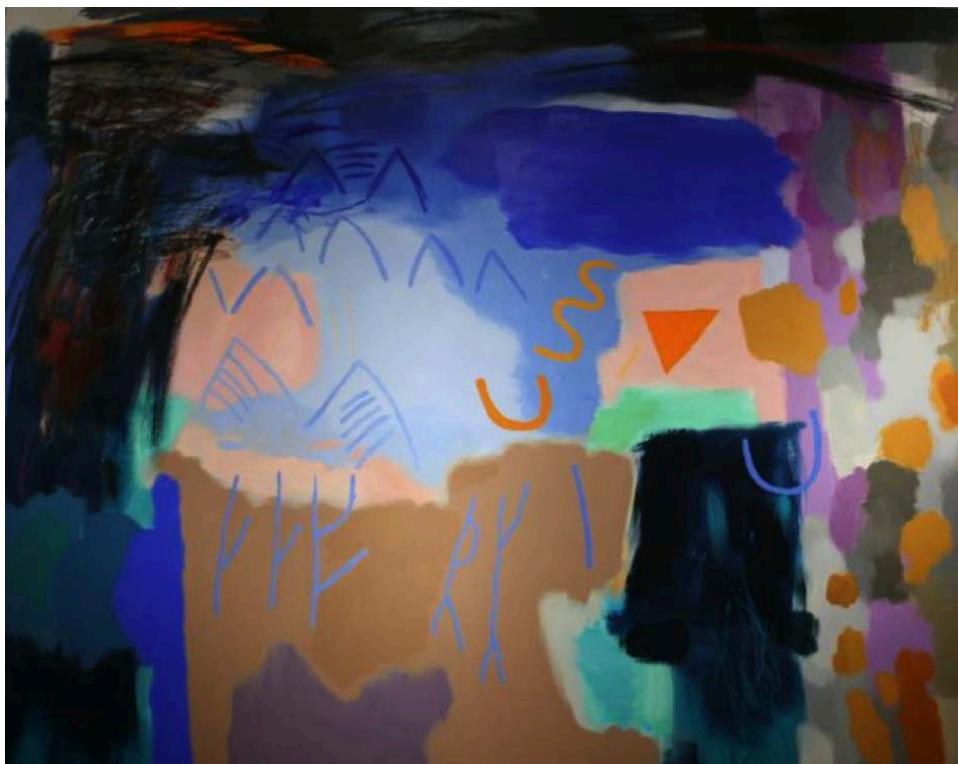
- 37 Along with this sense of identity, as a number of the artists revealed, is the importance of place in their heritage and culture, in their spiritual connection, sense of belonging and being at peace. After struggling with a small family in London, Ashley sought the peace of the countryside, growing a vegetable garden and keeping a milking goat to feed the children. Eventually she took the children to Wales, as did Rhys James and her husband Stephen West. Whether this can be termed "dropping out" (Adamson 2007, 106) or whether this was a withdrawal from city life in an attempt to create a better quality of life for nurturing their children, for the artists it provided time for the distillation of creative practice and directions.
- 38 As well, for Ashley it allowed her to implement some of the "revolutionary socialism" inherent in earlier artistic communities; ideas she might have discovered in her reading, through the Women's Institute or her own experiences of enforced retirement from stimulating work due to pregnancy, and her subsequent attempts to fill her days with creative activity. There are close parallels between Ashley's views of employing house-bound women in Wales to complete piecework, of supporting rural communities with meaningful work and of providing nutritious meals in the workplace, to those of William Morris and the Elmhursts. In terms of her design work Ashley repudiated the synthetic fabrics and pop styles of the 60s in favour of a nostalgic return to the past. As did Morris, she sought her inspiration for design from nature, from the hedgerows and fields of the countryside. She sought out patterns of earlier eras in fabrics and wallpapers, and she built an aesthetic around her romantic view of country life and the nostalgia of her memories of her visits to Dowlais.
- 39 Unlike Ashley, who continued to move from place to place according to the demands of the growing business, Rhys James came to identify more closely with her particular place, with "the fabric of the place" in mid-Wales. In restoring a very early Welsh farmhouse and barn, Rhys James and West came to admire and value the vernacular architecture and farm structures of their rural retreat. Like Ashley, Rhys James kept the kitchen garden flourishing to nourish her family, and nourished her own creativity by working daily in the studio, while the children were at school. For Rhys James, identity is about connection to place rather than about possession of language or culture. She is concerned how a view of Welshness based on language may exclude many people.
- 40 However, language is central to Lloyd Jones' view of Welsh identity and increasingly text has taken its place within the palimpsest of historical and cultural artefacts that conveys meaning in her work. Both women find Welsh writing, literature and poetry, inspirational in their work, although Rhys James is more connected to modern and contemporary writing and Lloyd Jones to folklore and the Welsh story telling and poetry traditions.

### Working in Wales and international influences

- 41 Adam's reference to Welshness as a "prison" (2005, 25) is a concern expressed by artists in this study. Lloyd Jones was conscious as an early career artist for the need to continually compare her work across a range of benchmarks to ensure that she continued to grow. Claudia Williams and her husband worked outside of Wales to seek

international recognition, while still exhibiting in Wales to maintain visibility amongst Welsh artists. By choosing to work in Wales, geographically distant and difficult to access from London, Rhys James recognised she had put herself at a disadvantage. Potentially she could be seen as not serious about her art career by working at the periphery rather than at the centre, and by being identified as Welsh she would not be seriously considered, as all things Welsh appeared to be stigmatised or even ridiculed. Lloyd Jones was also deeply concerned about the ongoing superior attitude of the English to Welsh culture and to art which has persisted almost to the present. She recognised that the further label of being a woman artist contributed another obstacle to success in finding a gallery to represent her, to success in exhibitions and sales, and in gaining critical review.

Mary Lloyd Jones  
Born 1934  
*Blue North*



Mary Lloyd Jones, *Blue North*. Oil on canvas. 5ft x 6ft (2009)  
2009  
Oil on canvas  
5ft x 6ft  
Private collection

- 42 The importance of looking to international standards was stressed by Rhys James, a position now being vindicated in recent invitations to exhibit outside of Britain. For Claudia Williams, her work was measured against work in France and won significant awards. Important international invitations and successes have also been awarded to Lloyd Jones. As Adams (2003) has written, while artists wish to be identified as Welsh, they also recognise the importance of international success. Some Welsh artists travel and work outside of Wales for recognition, and then return. Some study outside of Wales and return there to practise. This contributes to a rich hybridity in

contemporary Welsh art where artists have engaged with international trends as well as drawn upon iconography evolved from traditional Welsh forms. Shelagh Hourahane expresses this particularly well:

Artists in Wales ... [who] understand the importance of the landscape as a container of their history and culture, are in harmony with an international tendency in their efforts to represent a many-layered landscape. A comparison can be made with the form of a quilt in which pieces are taken from many sources, fabrics, which may have been saved over generations. They are blended into a new pattern in which designs with symbolic meanings, personal and collective can be incorporated (1999, 53).

- 43 International influences in the form of indigenous American culture have affected both Lloyd Jones and Kathy Williams. In particular the Navajo culture of the southwest has contributed to personal iconography and design work. Navajo geometric patterns and use of text inspired Lloyd Jones to use text in her paintings. While for Williams the weavings and patterns have been a powerful visual source in the creation of her own personal response in weaving, using hand dyed and spun wool.

### Postmodernity and the art/craft divide

- 44 Postmodernity has provided the conceptual framework and the tools for this study. To write about women's lives and careers using a traditional art history approach would continue to interpret women's experience from a western, masculinist bias perpetuating women's marginalisation and invisibility. Postmodernity challenged the white, male hegemony of the arts. It also challenged the hierarchical nature of the arts that placed painting and the other "fine" arts on the top rung of value, and design and craft lower down. As Adamson (2007, 83) has noted the early twentieth century theorists, Dewey and Gropius saw the "artistic potential" of all forms and resisted the hierarchies of the past. So postmodernity has led to wider adoption of this idea and a greater inclusivity which challenges the feminization or ethnic marginalization of certain art forms, and the inferior status that attends such categorisation.
- 45 This is an important position for women in this study. Lloyd Jones found a female Welsh visual tradition in her great grandmother's log cabin quilt. Quilts and the tradition to which they belong have been ignored by male art historians because they were seen as women's domestic handcraft and therefore belonging on the very lowest rung of the visual art hierarchy. For Lloyd Jones the inherited quilt, hung on the wall rather than draped on the bed, became an artwork in a style akin to abstraction, with a complex composition and even more complex symbolic meaning. While some male writers continue to identify these works in the Welsh context as "folksy" or "ethnic", and therefore backward, or choose to ignore them altogether, without what Adamson (2007, 5) terms "institutionalized authorization", they will continue to be undervalued and marginalised. The association of textiles with women and the home (the hiddenstream) has also been seen to carry overtones of amateurism.
- 46 Kathy Williams' medium of loom weaving fits in a different tradition, that of Welsh cottage industry in which the weaver was usually male. However, as contemporary art practice her weaving is at risk of being ignored by the visual art mainstream. As her work is highly regarded within the Welsh craft community, Williams is content with that recognition and she does not challenge the prejudices that confine her works to craft galleries.

- 47 Lloyd Jones in the 1980s moved outside the constraints of the frame-stretched canvas to work freely on draped fabrics. This coincided with a time when skills and media traditionally associated with the domestic space were being used by women for political subversion, such as their use at the Peace Vigil at Greenham Common. Lloyd Jones has continued to use fabric in the production of banners for a number of sites and events as well as in large works such as the four metre cloth piece incorporating text and references to prehistory and cave art, *Llyn-y-fan*, which was exhibited in China in Spring, 2009. She is making a conscious political stand about art. Art is present in our lives and work; it conveys beauty; and it is made by women (after Abbs 2001, 76).
- 48 Laura Ashley as a textile and interior designer was closely associated with industry and commerce and therefore relegation to low status on the hierarchy. Yet like Lloyd Jones' recognition of her inherited quilt as art, Ashley's designs also meet the three criteria listed above. Importantly, the Ashley aesthetic found itself in homes around the world conveying beauty and enjoyment to many millions of people and proudly proclaiming that this was created or inspired by a woman. Because her art communicated with other women it proliferated widely contributing to the success of the business. This success legitimised the international marketing of what was essentially a style and taste governed by a particular British take on a feminine and domestic aesthetic. It was a style that crossed many cultural and national boundaries as a consequence of globalization and mass media.
- 49 In earlier times in Western art, motherhood as a theme in art was confined to the symbolism of the Madonna and the *pietà*. The family portrait, whether royal or bourgeois, was more about male power and status than about the experience of motherhood. While Monet and Renoir painted scenes of family life and children's portraits, in the period of French Impressionism only the women artists, Berthe Morisot and, the American, Mary Cassatt, dared explore the theme in any depth. The painters, Williams and Rhys James, also draw on the domestic context for content and subjectivity in their work, thus affirming women's different experience of life. Neither of these two women conveys a sentimental view of childhood and maternity. Williams' mothers are strong, competent women actively taking part in the life and care of their children whether in the home or at leisure by the sea. Rhys James' family scenes are psychological dramas that raise powerful emotions in the viewer and challenge preconceived expectations and understandings about familial relationships. Both artists seem conscious of the potential for marginalization because of the nature of their art practice, its content and genre. As well as family relations, Rhys James explores the theme of sex role stereotyping in her automata. With regard to her self-portraiture she says: "it reveals the journey of the self and the world of the self, being something that you explore as a human being because you cannot know how anyone else feels" (Rhys James interview transcript 2008). It is a testament to Rhys James' growing status as a contemporary figurative artist, that this work is widely exhibited and receives critical support. In previous years such directness and honesty would have been unacceptable because of the delegitimation of expression of such content by the male art establishment. While both artists have confidently worked in these genres over their careers, delegitimation of expression of feminine sexuality and subjectivity still appears to be of concern for contemporary women artists (Collet 2004).
- 50 Marketing is an important aspect of success whether in business or in promoting one's art as can be seen from Ashley's experience. Communication through the print

media is essential for artists working at a distance from major centres of art and critical reviews of exhibitions, art history writing and commentary are fundamental to ensuring the visibility of artists working in Wales. In its own gallery, the Makers Guild has established a centre for exhibition, sales and publicity for craft. The Guild uses the internet effectively. Identifying the work as craft has provided an audience and a market that recognises the nature and the quality of the work.

- 51 In Wales there is no national, public gallery dedicated to the acquisition and exhibition of contemporary art. Women in this study strongly support writers in the visual arts who argue for a national gallery and magazines dedicated to contemporary Welsh art. Without these national institutions, Welsh visual culture has no focus for international attention and women's contributions are at risk of being forgotten and unrecorded as has been the case in the past. While Hugh Adams' believes Welsh artists are now capable and confident of asserting their distinctiveness through "cultural autonomy" (2003, 15), Iwan Bala writes that Wales has not quite shaken off her "colonised mentality" (2005, 2). He calls for financial support for the initiatives above from National Assembly to enable the country to achieve a position of post-colonialism.

## Conclusion

- 52 This paper has raised some of the issues addressed in the literature and the critical writing about Welsh art. It has also provided a brief but composite picture of five women making art in Wales through the last half of the twentieth century and, for four of the women, into the new millennium.
- 53 These life histories have gone some of the way to redressing the neglect identified by Paul O'Leary in his review of Lord's (2000) book, *Imaging The Nation* - the lack of discussion or engagement in this book and by art historians to date with "themes such as gender and national identity" (2001, 907). The failure of art historians to write in the history of Welsh women's art has impoverished the world's knowledge of Welsh visual culture and left generations of artists without a visual tradition with which to connect. Despite this, women have persevered and made successful careers supported by their partners or by fellow women artists. The women invited to participate in this research are mature artists who reflect a diversity of practice and life experiences. The inclusion of Laura Ashley's life history based on the information already in the public domain was a contentious one in the light of the chosen methodology but provided new insights on her creative production through application of the lenses of gender and national identity.
- 54 As Adams and Bala confirm, Welsh visual art is moving the country forward in terms of self-image as an autonomous nation. Women artists are a major part of this movement. No matter how they identify as Welsh, the diversity of their combined creative efforts, in part drawing on past visual traditions (whether hiddenstream or mainstream) and in part creating new traditions for future artists, should be celebrated and recorded to avoid the erasure which has followed other flourishings of women's creativity in the past. While grounding their work in a personal connection to Wales, the women in this study have maintained a creative engagement with international trends and rigour. Central to their stories is their historical, cultural and emotional connection to their land, the "fabric of the place".



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aaron, Jane, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (eds.). *Our Sisters' Land. The Changing Identities of Women in Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994.
- Abbs, Peter. "An Encompassing Vision." In *The Colour of Saying. The Work of Mary Lloyd Jones*. Ed. Eve Ropek. Llandysul, Wales: Gomer Press, 2001. 75-84.
- Adams, Hugh. *Imaging Wales*. Bridgend Wales: Seren Press, 2003.
- Adamson, Glenn. *Thinking Through Craft*. Oxford: Berg, 2007.
- Bala, Iwan (ed.). *Certain Welsh Artists. Custodial Aesthetics in Contemporary Welsh Art*. Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 1999.
- . "Visual Art and the Postcolonial," 2005. *Horizon Wales*. Visited 17/9/2010. <<http://dspace.trinitycm.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10412/40/2/4%20Horizon%20Wales.pdf>>
- Barone, Thomas. "Pervasive writings, vigilant readings and reconstructed characters: the paradox of trust in educational storytelling." *Qualitative Studies in Education* 8:1 (1995): 63-74.
- Beddoe, Deirdre. *Out of the Shadows: a history of women in twentieth-century Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000.
- (ed.). *Changing Times*. Dinas Powys, Wales: Honno Press, 2003.
- Borland, Kate. "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research." In *Women's Words - The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. (eds.). Daphne Patai et al. London: Routledge, 1991. 63-75.
- Collet, Penelope. "Picturing Artists: A feminist poststructuralist study of nine women." Melbourne: La Trobe University, 1998.
- . *Women Contesting the Mainstream Discourses of the Art World*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.
- Encyclopedia of Irish and World Art. "William Morris." Visited 20/9/2010. <<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-artists/william-morris.htm>>
- Greer, Germaine. *The Obstacle Race*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1979.
- Grimshaw, Patricia and Lynne Strahan (eds.). *The Half Open Door*. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982.
- Heuser, Harry and Robert Meyrick. "Claudia Williams: An Intimate Acquaintance." Bristol, UK: Sansom Limited, 2014.
- Hourahane, Shelagh. "The Layers of a Landscape." In *Certain Welsh Artists. Custodial Aesthetics in Contemporary Welsh Art*. Ed. Iwan Bala. Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 1999. 52-65.
- Hughes, Philip and Jessica Hemmings. *Mary Lloyd Jones. Signs of Life*. Ruthin, Wales: Ruthin Craft Centre, The Centre for Applied Arts, 2013.
- Jones, Jennifer. *Welsh Quilts*. Carmarthen, Wales: Towy Publishing, 1997.
- Krikorian, Tamara. "Fragile Things." In *Certain Welsh Artists. Custodial Aesthetics in Contemporary Welsh Art*. Ed. Iwan Bala. Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 1999. 175-185.



Lloyd Jones, Mary. "Between Two Worlds." In *Our Sisters' Land. The Changing Identities of Women in Wales*. Eds. Jane Aaron et al. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994. 273-279.

Lord, Peter. *Imaging the Nation*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000.

Nettle, Daniel and Suzanne Romaine. "Essay. Vanishing Voices." In *First Language. Mary Lloyd Jones*. Ed. Mary Lloyd Jones. Llandysul, Wales: Gomer Press, 2006. 103-111.

O'Leary, Paul. "Review: *The Visual Culture of Wales. Imaging the Nation* by Peter Lord." *The English Historical Review* 116:468 (2001): 905-907.

Petersen, Karen and J.J. Wilson. *Women Artists*. London: The Women's Press, Harper and Row, 1976.

Rhys James, Shani et al. *The Rivalry of Flowers*. Bridgend, Wales: Seren Press, 2013.

Sutherland Harris, Anne and Linda Nochlin. *Women Artists 1550-1950*. New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976.

University of Wales. "Gregynog: Art & Music, History, Davies Sisters, Gregynog Press." Visited 13/4/2015. <<http://www.gregynog.org/art-history>>

Vincentelli, Moira. "Artefact and Identity: the Welsh dresser as domestic display and cultural symbol." In *Our Sisters' Land. The Changing Identities of Women in Wales*. Eds. Jane Aaron et al. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994. 228-241.

---. "Artefact and Identity. The Welsh dresser: A case study." *Interpreting Ceramics*, 1 (2000). Visited 17/9/ 2007. <<http://www.wic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue001/welsh/welsh.htm>>

White, Carole and Sian Rhiannon Williams. *Struggle or Starve: Women's lives in the South Wales valleys between the two world wars*. Dinas Powys, Wales: Honno Press, 1998.

Woolf, Janet. *Women's Knowledge and Women's Art*. Queensland, Australia: Griffith University, 1989.

## NOTES

1. Author's note: This updated paper was originally drawn from an early manuscript of my book, *The Life Histories of Five Contemporary Welsh Women Artists: The interweaving of art into living and living into art*, published by Edwin Mellen Press in 2012. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Congrès de la SAES, Paris 20, 21, 22 May 2011–Atelier d'études galloises

2. [artinwales.250x.com/ArtistsLI.htm](http://artinwales.250x.com/ArtistsLI.htm)

3. <http://www.artwales.com/artists-detail-mtg-enphp?artistID=56>

4. <http://www.makersguildinwales.org.uk/makers-guild-in-wales/members-profiles?id=149>

5. <http://www.thebiographychannel.co.uk/biographies/laura-ashley.html>

6. <http://www.artwales.com/exhibition-mtg-en.php?locationID=79>

## ABSTRACTS

There is still a long way to go to establish an artistic tradition for women in Wales. In this paper I report some conclusions arising from recent life history research. While some would argue that

for all Welsh artists, women and men, this is a problem, obstacles to women's careers in art continue to be a concern for the artists in my study. Tensions arise: within the home, in their art training, in attempting to exhibit and gain critical recognition, in their identification as Welsh, in their choice to work in Wales rather than in the leading art centres such as London, and in their choice of art media, genre and content. Through life history methodology it was possible to focus on the subjective lives of four women artists, to recognise their diversity, and to collaborate with them in the research process to provide new insights about their lives. A biographical approach was used to write the narrative about the fifth artist who is no longer living. The conclusions about the women's lives are thematised around current issues of concern for artists and writers on the arts. These include Welsh identity, the growing awareness of post-colonialism, pastoralism and the art/craft divide. Central to the research are the women's individual experiences of living and working in Wales and the influence this has had on their creative work.

Il y a encore un long chemin à faire pour établir une tradition artistique pour les femmes au Pays de Galles. Dans cet article, je relève quelques conclusions découlant des recherches récentes sur les histoires de vie. Si certains diront qu'il s'agit d'un problème qui touche tous les artistes du Pays de Galles, femmes et hommes, néanmoins les obstacles à une carrière artistique pour les femmes continuent d'être une préoccupation pour les femmes artistes de mon étude. Des tensions apparaissent: à la maison, au niveau de leur formation artistique, lorsqu'elles souhaitent exposer et obtenir la reconnaissance critique, dans leur manière de s'identifier comme Galloises, dans leur choix de travailler au Pays de Galles plutôt que dans les grands centres d'art tels que Londres, et dans le choix de médium, de genre et de contenu. Grâce à la méthodologie de l'histoire de vie, il a été possible de cerner de près la vie subjective de quatre artistes femmes, de reconnaître leur diversité, et de collaborer avec elles dans le processus de recherche afin d'obtenir de nouvelles perspectives sur leur vie. Une approche biographique a été utilisée pour écrire le récit de la cinquième artiste, qui n'est plus en vie. Les conclusions sur la vie de ces femmes abordent des thématiques d'un intérêt très actuel pour tout artiste ou chercheur dans le domaine. Il s'agit notamment de l'identité galloise, la prise de conscience émergeante des phénomènes de post-colonialisme, le pastoralisme et la fracture art / artisanat. Au cœur de la recherche sont les expériences individuelles de ces femmes, à vivre et à travailler au Pays de Galles, et l'influence de ce choix sur leur travail créatif.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Wales, women artists, life history, feminist research, post-colonialism, postmodernism, pastoralism, identity, art/craft divide

**Mots-clés:** Pays des Galles, femmes artistes, histoire de la vie ou histoire orale, recherche féministe, post-colonialisme, postmodernisme, identité, pastoralisme, fracture art/artisanat

## AUTHORS

### PENELOPE COLLET

Former Senior Lecturer

La Trobe University Bendigo, Australia

p.collet@latrobe.edu.au